

A woman brought a very limp duck to a veterinarian. As she laid her pet on the table, the vet pulled out his stethoscope and listened to the bird's chest. After a moment, the vet shook his head and sadly said, "I'm sorry, Ma'am, but your duck, Cuddles, has passed away." The distressed woman wailed, "How can you be so sure?" "Oh, I'm sure. Your duck is dead," the vet replied. "Wait a minute – you haven't done any tests or anything. He might just be in a coma or something." The vet rolled his eyes, turned around and left the room. He returned a few minutes later with a black Labrador retriever. As the duck's owner looked on in amazement, the dog stood on his hind legs, put his front paws on the examination table and sniffed the duck from top to bottom. He then looked up at the vet with sad eyes and shook his head. The vet patted the dog on the head and took it out of the room. A few minutes later he returned with a cat. The cat jumped on the table and also delicately sniffed the bird from head to foot. The cat sat back on its haunches, shook its head, meowed softly and strolled out of the room. The vet looked at the woman and said, "I'm sorry, but as I said, this is most definitely, 100% certifiable, a dead duck." The vet turned to his computer terminal, hit a few keys and produced a bill, which he handed to the woman. The duck's owner, still in shock, took the bill. "\$550!" she cried, "\$550 just to tell me my duck is dead?!" The vet shrugged, "I'm sorry. If you had just taken my word for it, the bill would have been \$50, but with the Lab Report and the Cat Scan, it's now \$550."

OK, that was my nod to getting your attention with a shamelessly slight – and weird connection to today's gospel. I'll get to that connection. But now down to business with some biblical background. The chapter immediately *after* this story begins like this: "Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. There they made Him a supper; Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at table with Him..." That means it's 5 days before Jesus' crucifixion and death. I've always thought this was an odd way to begin Holy Week in the life of Jesus – even for the gospel of John. Jesus is in Bethany being entertained by His good friends Mary and Martha. John casually remarks that Lazarus, whom Jesus has just raised from the dead, is there at table with them. Get that? -- whom He has just RAISED FROM THE DEAD? It seems very odd – being seated at the table with Lazarus. So let's suppose you're at this dinner party – and Martha says, "You know our rabbi, Jesus. And next to Him is our brother, Lazarus, who died last week, but now, thanks to Jesus, is back among the living. Pour yourself a drink and have the seat between them." And so we ask politely, "So how was your week, Lazarus?" And he replies, "Well I was sick unto death, then I was buried for three days, now Jesus has raised me from the dead, and I'm here at my sister's dinner party. And how was your week? How are things with that coronavirus going for you?" You haven't killed your wife, have you? But in case you did, and you are now having regrets, you can always call Jesus to raise her from the dead".....It's all a bit bizarre, don't you think?

There is something about this gospel that has always bugged me – but it probably has more to do with me than it does with the gospel. OK, I admit it. I'm not a patient person! Today's Gospel – dead Lazarus raised by shouting Jesus – has an odd detail that might be noted only by the impatient among us. Jesus' friends Martha and Mary summon Him to the bedside of their brother Lazarus. "Come quickly!" begs Martha. "Lazarus whom you love is ill." Jesus' response to Martha's plea for emergency medical assistance, "Oh, Lazarus isn't terminal – it's just a flesh wound!" How does Jesus know, with no lab report and no cat scan (see I worked the weird connection in!)? [And listen, if you're sitting there on your couch saying "I think he's losing it – you try being home with me for a whole week by myself! I'm getting on my nerves!"] Jesus of course says it more eloquently than using the words of Monty Python, but the meaning is the same. He knows that the

sickness is not to end in death. Three days later, when Jesus finally makes it to Mary and Martha's, Martha gives Jesus a piece of her mind.

"Don't rush right over, Mr. Savior. It's too late for Lazarus. He's been entombed for 4 days – and, as she says in the elegant King James Version, "by this time, he stinketh." My impatient eye is stuck upon an odd detail in this oddest story of the gospels. When Jesus is originally beseeched by Mary and Martha to rush over and heal His good friend Lazarus, John says Jesus WAITED two days!

Second, so we need to ask – WHY didn't Mr. Compassion rush right over and save those sisters and their brother this grief? Isn't that our definition of friendship: someone who cares enough to drop everything and come when we call? What was Jesus doing that was MORE important than aiding a friend in dire need? Was Jesus in the middle of writing a 3 point Sermon on the Mount? Did Jesus have a thousand sick people triaged ahead of Lazarus? John just says, "He stayed where He was." The text tells us that Bethany was a little less than 2 miles from Jerusalem! Jesus could have walked there in about a half an hour!

Of course this is the only gospel where Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die." (11:25) And this Jesus who is fully in charge of the situation, says "Let's return to Judea again....Our friend Lazarus is sleeping, but I am going in order to wake him up." The Greek actually is more literally rendered as "I am going to save him," a double entendre that 'wake him up' doesn't quite express. Jesus is in charge. BUT HE'S NOT WORKING ON OUR TIMETABLE. Which is a good thing for us to remember as we walk the Coronavirus highway. God is in charge. Which means that this virus is going to play out on HIS terms, and not ours. Oh we need to pray and humbly ask for help, and then surrender to the fact that there are lots of things in life that we can't control. This is just another one of them. And part of growing up is accepting that awful, difficult, but true fact.

When Jesus finally stops what's He's doing (though whatever it is isn't significant enough for John to mention it!) and gets to the cemetery, Jesus pulls off a spectacular resuscitation. At Jesus' cry, "Lazarus, come out! Untie him and let him go free!" Lazarus strides forth from the tomb! Pretty impressive. All's well that ends well, we say. But still, a 2-DAY DELAY? WHY? WHY THE WAIT? What good is God's goodness if it's goodness postponed? And then I read it in a commentary. From the time the Hebrews went into slavery to the day God delivered them was about FOUR HUNDRED YEARS! Exodus begins with God showing up to Moses in the burning bush, "I am the God of your forefathers. I have heard the cry of my people. I have come down to deliver them from the hand of Pharaoh." And though it's not found in our Bibles, Moses probably thought to himself: "Well it's about time! We've been slaves for FOUR HUNDRED YEARS. Why the rush?!"

Third, so what does this story have to say to us, right now in our struggle with a virus? Well, worldwide now, people have been praying about this since it first began in Wuhan before Christmas. It's now the end of March. We say we are a Christian nation, and so now our prayers have been added to millions of others around the world. We want life to go back to normal. We want to get back to work, we want to get paid. I want Saint Andrew's to not go under – especially not on my watch!

But none of this is new, is it? History – and our own experience – and that of countless family and friends – have taught us that we often pray for days, weeks, months, years – even decades – to be rescued, and nothing seems to happen. Theologian Stanley Hauerwas says that Israel's faith was "long training in being out of control" of their relationship with God, without abandoning God – or despising Him. That's not a bad definition of the training required for us to be faithful in our discipleship – learning the patience to live our lives out of our control, vulnerable to the comings, goings, and tardiness of a living God.

I know in my attempts to be pastor, I find it hard to wait for God. I so want our efforts to bear fruit. NOW. I pray for this every day in every parish I've ever served. NOW. I never had more than 12 years in a parish till I was sent somewhere else. I wanted God to show up! Parishioners at every place have basically said to me at different points: "It took the Lord 400 years between God's last words of the Old Testament and God's first words of the New. We can wait long enough for you to be transferred out of here. We'll still be here after you're finally, thankfully gone!" My strategy has always been that just when they are about to run me out of town – I run to the front and pretend I'm leading the parade!

Remember – grace means gift. Grace isn't grace if it's predictable, programmable, or on demand. Maybe that's why God sometimes takes God's own good time to show up, to reach out, to move, and to save. There is a lot for us to learn in waiting for prayer to be answered – patience, compassion, humility, submission to a will and plan bigger than our own, love. All those things are only learned in the crucible of suffering, pounded out on the anvil of fire.

I often hear parents lament that their children "are not Christian now." But I've been around long enough that I think that statement needs a little correction. "Not Christian YET." God's got lots of ways of getting what God wants, but He takes His own sweet time. Tell your son or daughter to keep looking over their shoulder as they move into their 40's. God always gets what He wants in the end. And He wants all of us. No matter how far away we stray. It took God 5 years to convince me that He wanted me to move to North Carolina, and I'm so glad that He kept at it. The Thessalonians asked Paul, "When is Jesus returning? We're tired of waiting." "Oh, with the Lord a thousand years is like one day," Paul replied. Nice try, Paul. When the women left the tomb of Jesus on Easter Sunday morning, they went running back to the church in Jerusalem and said "He's back! Jesus is risen!" And the church said, "What's He been doing since Friday?! What took so long?"

One of the most important virtues is patience. It's the virtue of allowing God to be God in God's own good time. This virus is loudly reminding us that our lives are not under our sole control. We live on God's time, not ours. He has numbered all of our days before one of them came into being. Maybe we're made to wait to purge us of our desire to make our lives turn out on our own, to cure us of impatience, to let God be God in time. Maybe we must wait because what God is up to is more than the cure of a virus in one moment of history, righting of a few injustices, the soothing of some pain. If it's a new heaven and new earth, creation brought to completion, total renovation, it may take a while. We're pretty messed up.

Every time I have left a parish people have asked me "What do you think will be your legacy here?" I always say, "God only knows." I mean it. It's up to God to make our lives mean something beyond our time or beyond ourselves. As Pope Benedict put it when he resigned the papacy, "Only God has a future." Our sole hope is that the God who raised Lazarus, albeit three days after His death, will raise us up, heal the world of this virus, broaden our patience, deepen our love and compassion for all of our hurting and broken world. Our 'legacy' is up to God. And how we react as believers in Christ to this pandemic could well be a defining part of our legacy. May it be life-giving to all the world. Amen. (Help from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, April-June 2017, p. 3-5)